

Increase of Crime and Violence *vis-a-vis* Apparent Religious Glossiness

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The land in its historical setting

Historians as well as non-historians, both in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, seem to be fully aware that the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka dates back to more than twenty-three centuries. These selfsame people need to know a great deal more when they attempt to talk analytically about the political and social crisis in Sri Lanka today. Any one with any sense in his head has to admit that there is at the moment a calamitous situation, indeed a typhoon of alarming magnitude, swirling over our heads.

Sri Lanka today has a multi-ethnic and multi-religious, even disastrously a multi-political community. Facts are too well known for us to spell out here the demographic composition of this group of people. True enough, nearly a seventy percent of these make the Sinhala Buddhists of the island. Hindus, Moslems and Christians [containing both the Roman Catholics and the Anglicans] make the balance. They all have in this country, a longer or shorter history, very well recorded and documented and portrayed in many quarters. Time and again, wars and colonial conquests and at times like today, less visible political circumstance have favoured these smaller groups quite out of proportion. These include all manner of educational assistance, plentiful financial assistance etc. etc. For centuries these situations have changed considerably the tenor of thought, word and deed of Sri Lankan people.

Prior to the arrival of Buddhism in this country, it is recorded that Sri Lankans even had a 'god of the hunt' or *Vyādha-deva* who resided in the palm or palmyrah tree [*tāla-rukka*]. It is also widely known that on the day Thera

Mahinda arrived in this country from India with the message of Buddhism, the then ruler of the land, King Devanam Piya Tissa, was caught going out on the royal hunt. The message of Buddhism had by then, i.e., well over two thousand three hundred years ago, certainly struck a different note across the civilized world. Convinced, persuaded or may even be pressurized, kings of Sri Lanka like Amaṇḍagāmanī, Silākāla, Aggabodhi IV and Mahinda III, following the melodious message of *ahimsā* [non-violence] of Buddhism ordered from time to time, within two hundred years after the arrival of Buddhism, that no animals be slaughtered [*mā ghāta*], even if limited to specified areas in the land.

Today, there is a world-wide awakening to the theme 'Compassion, the Ultimate Ethic'. There is now emerging a widely spread consonance between saner and sober thinking in the world at large and the message that the Buddha gave to the world more than two and a half millennia ago. An American lady by the name of Virginia Moran writes a book by the name **Compassion, The Ultimate Ethic** [1985. Reprinted in 1985, 1991, 1997] wherein she totally breathes the spirit of American Veganism which accords well with the Indian concept of *ahimsā* as known to the world through Buddhism and Jainism. She quotes freely from the Buddhist Dhammapada [Dhp. v. 270] as well as from several Mahayana Buddhist sutras in Sanskrit in defense of the rights of animals.

The Predators

Political conquests and consequent religious incursions into this country which followed in the course of history have certainly done much violence to this beautifully laid out fabric of love towards all life. Divine sanctions derived from scriptures which have made inroads into our culture and religious practices observed in many of those invading institutions, have disastrously crossed our path. The spirit in which acquisitive religious wars have been fought and justified in the lands of the colonialists, whether from near or far, have infected us to the core. Respect and love for life of man, as well as of bird and beast, has been completely scorched in our land. This is well before the days of the mass media

of today. Undeniably, a few random shots in this wise might have been fired in our land well before this, in the wilds, in the darkness of the night.

The same is true with regard to the use of alcohol. In certain quarters, it came to have a religious sanction, and not long afterwards also became a status symbol in social life, including the menacing 'one for the road' at the conclusion of every domestic party, particularly of those cringing for a veneer of social elitism. Ere long, meat eating and use of alcohol in the day-to-day life of even the commoners, undeniably became elitist status symbols, heralded by the ruling classes. The impoverished subjects of the land were compelled to imitate and follow these degrading habits of the militant colonialists, in the not unusual desire for social escalation. It has taken centuries and a great deal more sensitivity to brand these as vulgarities. New thinking in the world, particularly in the west, is doing it.

In a publicizing note to Victoria Moran's COMPASSION: THE ULTIMATE ETHIC referred to above, the publishers say the following.

" The vegan chooses to abstain from anything which has its origin in the pain, exploitation or death of a sentient fellow creature.

Although its ethical roots can be traced back to thousands of years, it has only been in recent times that various health benefits and ecological advantages of vegan living have begun to attract widespread attention. Victoria Moran examines why people are turning to this compassionate way of living, and the difference it is making in their lives."

The Cancerous Decay

We noted above the disastrous cultural confrontation which obviously took place in our land with the arrival in three successive waves of aggressive colonialists, particularly from the west, whose material culture, specially with their use of gun powder, was estimated as being higher. On the religious front, the

religious thinking of the colonialists was unquestionably very far removed from the spirit of the founders of their creeds. As militants, they had to use their religion in a spirit of self-righteousness, with a supremacist arrogance, looking down upon the conquered as heathens and pagans who needed, in the name of their God, to be converted to their own faith. Those who submitted and surrendered became a favored lot, part of the tame flock, with no spirit of challenge within them. They had also to be thankful for their daily bread.

The rest of the population had to resist and revolt necessarily, in a desire to safeguard their cultural heritage. This is what led a people who had been taught and who had learnt very well in a spirit of *mettā* to look upon the other, man or animal, as not being different from oneself to resist, challenge and fight everyone who gives them offense. When war is brought to their door step, and in a spirit of plunder, they necessarily have to fight. They do not wish to be deprived of their legitimate possessions.

Criminality and Violence as a Revolt against Suppression

We have every reason to believe that it is the tyranny of colonial suppression which a race of people who believed that their culture was undeniably higher than that of the conqueror had to submissively suffer which invariably burst out as criminality and violence. It was indeed suppression of their traditional religious beliefs and much cherished cultural values. It was an invariable revolt against everybody in power, those in political authority, and subsequently the parents in the home who normally were empowered to direct policy. We believe, this led in course of time to the revolt against many other derivative persons like teachers and even the religious clergy.

In recent years, specially in the second half of this century, in the period after the horrors of World War II, when poverty, starvation and lack of employment opportunities came in its wake, this restriction was apparently felt as being further tightened. The youth of the land showed a greater sensitivity to this. By this time

the real oppressor was gone but somebody nearer home had to be assailed and assaulted as perpetrating this age old tyranny. As for the modus operandi of expressing this revolt, there is no gainsaying that the world around provided the blueprint, with the generous helping hand of the media, the television, radio and the printed word.

Reports, records and pictorial material relating to incidence of crime and violence kept pouring into less affluent countries, even if it were not with commendation of heroism, with no appraisal or assessment of any sort. Cheap and uncensored films, with much lower standards of morality by any world standards, also found their way into the midst of these under-privileged and highly irritated people.

At this time, there was also fermenting in this country a lamentable religious competitiveness, set in motion by diverse religious groups. with lot of money thrown around to win over new converts. In the process, they not only decried the existing value systems of the land but also offered cheaper religious attractions like divine healing and social escalation. These generated, instead of a new religious orientation, a great deal of religious anarchy in the land.

Through these cheap and newfangled value distortions, the woman in the home as mother and wife also began to lose her respected position. This we believe, led at least in part to the degrading sex offenses, in various pockets of Sri Lankan society, both high and low, humble and elite.

In a highly money-oriented society like Sri Lanka today, whether at state level or in the private sector, not unlike in many other big and smaller states in the world, religion is used both as a convenient and a mischevious label. It is used both for promoting and prosecuting purposes. Let us not fool ourselves or the public with smoke screens.